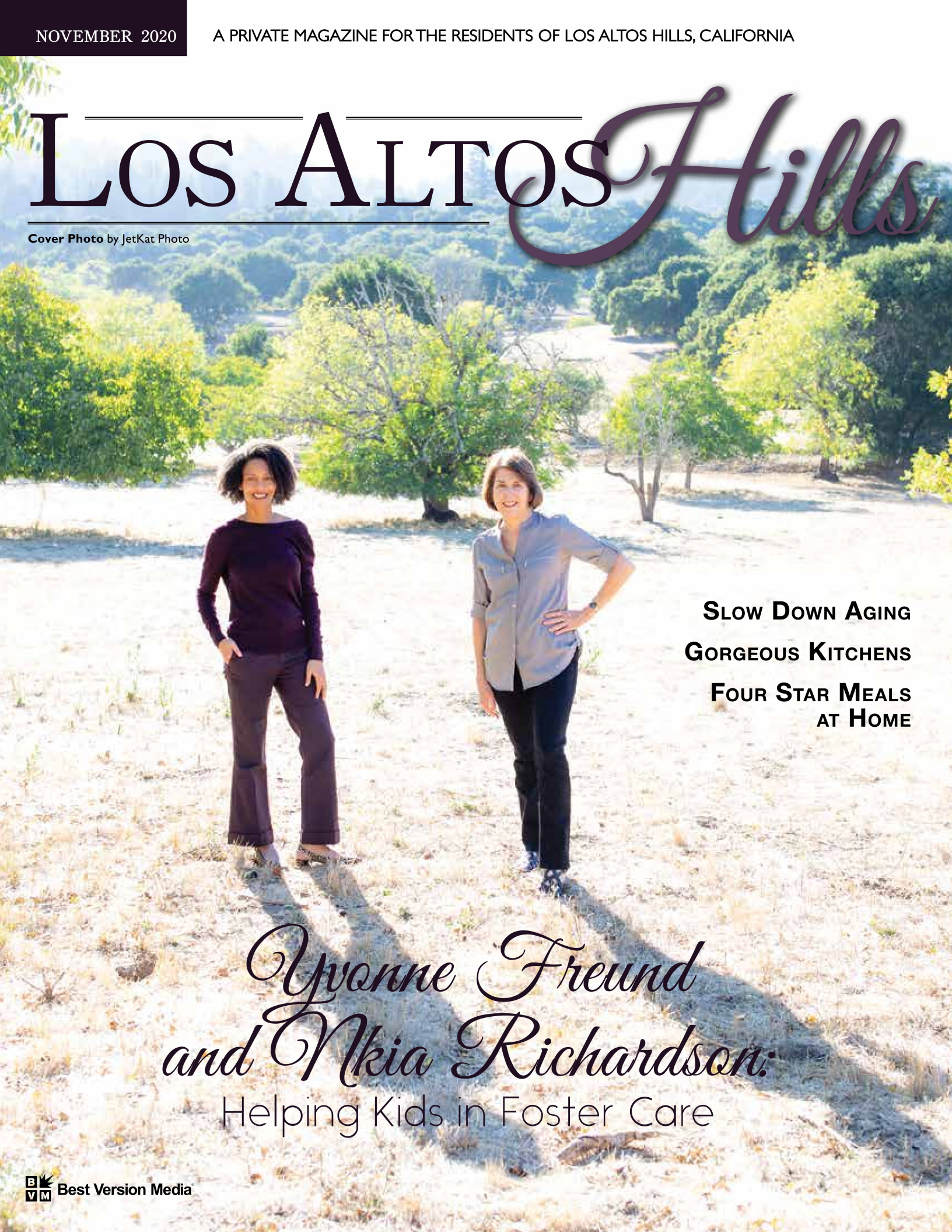


LOS ALTOS *Hills*

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Yvonne Freund
and Nkia Richardson:
Helping Kids in Foster Care

Helping Kids in Foster Care

By Abbie Burgess



Nkia Richardson is the Executive Director of CASA of San Mateo County. Image by JetKat Photo



Yvonne Freund is a longtime CASA volunteer. Image by JetKat Photo.

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hen Yvonne Freund first heard about the nonprofit organization CASA, she was intrigued by the potential to make a positive impact on children. "My interest was piqued by the fact that a CASA (Court-Appointed Special Advocate) volunteer has the

opportunity to develop a long term relationship with a youth who is in the social services system, either because of family issues or the youth's problems with the law," she says. The volunteer's job is to advocate to the court to be sure that the best interests of the child are met. A volunteer will stay with the youth until the case is resolved, enabling them to have a positive impact on the child's growth and development.

Yvonne's first CASA youth was a 10-year-old boy who had recently been reunited with his mother after having been removed from her home two years prior. "My job was to monitor the reunification from the child's perspective to be sure that he was safe and comfortable in the renewed relationship," she shares. "A side advantage of this case was that I also got to know the mother and to appreciate how hard she had worked in the two years to turn her life around so that she could have custody of her son again. I was also impressed with the various types of support that the San Mateo Social Services provide to start people who have been through trauma on a new path."

The Local Need

Over 50,000 youth are in foster care in California, the most of any US



CASA volunteers meet with their CASA youth regularly to provide a stable presence.

state. Though full of deeply committed professionals, the overburdened foster care system cannot meet all the needs of the children in the system. That's where Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) come in, offering a group of highly trained volunteers, appointed by judges to advocate for children in foster care. These community volunteers provide a stable presence and a voice for these children. As young people navigate a period of trauma, uncertainty and change, a CASA volunteer may be the only consistent and caring adult presence in a child's life. While meeting weekly, volunteers provide companionship and stability while getting to know the child and encouraging their special interests.

Yvonne's Path to Service

Trained as a microbiologist and an immunologist, Yvonne had the

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opportunity to spend a summer in rural Kenya in 1983 working on a nutrition project organized by UC Berkeley and UCLA. "It made me realize how easy it was to make a difference to improve people's lives in the developing world," she says. "When I returned to the US, I decided that I would like to put my scientific research skills to work developing drugs for diseases of the developing world."

With some time and persistence she got her opportunity: working for a small biotech firm in Palo Alto. The company's main focus was antibacterial drugs, but with the help of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, it was also developing pharmaceuticals to combat tropical diseases.

"The most notable effort was the development of an oral, single-dose tablet for curing African sleeping sickness," Yvonne says, adding that the compound is now in an extended Phase 3 clinical trial in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and is showing outstanding results in efficacy and safety.

In 2016, the company was bought out by Pfizer and the doors were closed on the Palo Alto facility. "As I regrouped from this adventure, I realized that although I had always loved Africa, there were serious issues here at home too," she says. One passion that called to her was to work to decrease gun violence in this country. She found the organization Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, a group of Moms (and Dads) with approximately 6 million members in all states in the US. "Becoming active in the local chapter not only allowed me to make new friends with a group of passionate, incredibly hard-working, like-minded people," she says. But even more important to her was the chance to work toward decreasing the numbers of firearms-related suicides and domestic violence deaths.

"Having turned my focus to the United States, I felt the need to balance my work to change laws and policy with a more one-on-one approach, preferably with children, since my two are now grown," she says. "I think that CASA provides a very important service, especially now, in the time of COVID-19, with its restrictions on normal activities. It is well-known that incidences of domestic violence and violence to children have increased due to confinement to small living spaces, financial stresses and generalized anxiety. At this time, I think it is more important than ever to reach out and help those children caught in the middle of these stressful times."

Yvonne shares that her work as a CASA has also enabled her to grow. "My current CASA youth is a 10-year old girl, recently removed from her parents for her safety. I will continue to support her while the parents learn new skills so that ultimately the family can be reunited."

The CASA staff is passionate, hard working and very caring. "Each new CASA has a supervisor. Mine has been tremendously helpful with some challenges early in my second case." CASA also has monthly special training sessions for volunteers which have been helpful to Yvonne by providing information about topics such as teaching how to have mindful interactions with a child who has experienced early childhood trauma.

Become a CASA Volunteer

CASA of San Mateo County pairs children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems with community volunteers who provide one-on-one support, mentoring and advocacy in the courtroom and beyond. These caring and dedicated volunteers—from all walks of life—help children heal from trauma and access the services they need to thrive. CASA volunteers make sure their basic rights and essential needs don't get overlooked or ignored in the system. They remain with the child until the case is closed and the child is placed in a safe, permanent home. With the help of CASA, their stories have a better ending.

To become a CASA, one needs to complete a 10-week training course to understand the social services system, to learn about issues that youths face and to practice role-playing so that the first interactions with a new person go smoothly. If you are interested in making a difference in the life of a child, there is tremendous opportunity with CASA, in particular for men, as boys need male role models while they navigate adolescence and young adulthood.

Upcoming Trainings

CASA volunteers are adults 21 years of age or older. They are community members who care about children and who form a personal connection, a connection that for many is life changing.

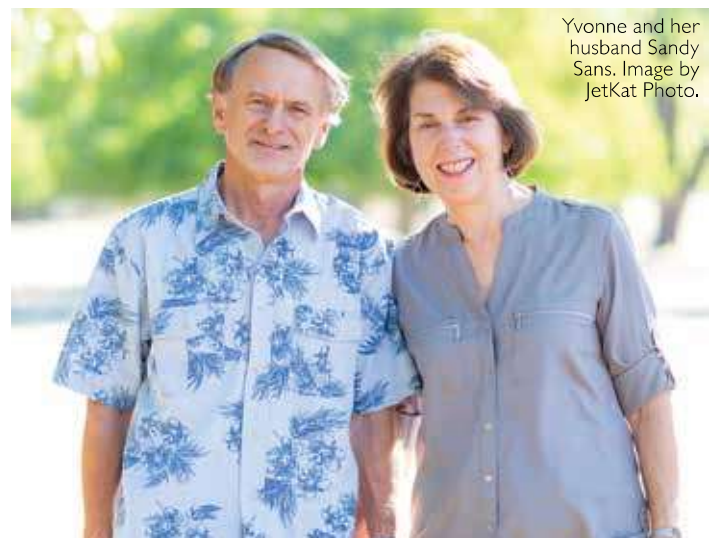
The first step to becoming a CASA volunteer is to attend an orientation. After orientation, you will complete an application and schedule a screening interview with a CASA staff member. After the interview, if there is a mutual fit, you will be invited to begin training.

Winter Training begins January 12.

Training is held virtually through Zoom and CASA University over a period of four weeks.

Volunteers who successfully complete the 5 courses and attend all 6 classes are sworn in by a judicial officer at a graduation ceremony.

Zoom sessions are held from 6-9pm during a weekday.



Yvonne and her husband Sandy Sans. Image by JetKat Photo.